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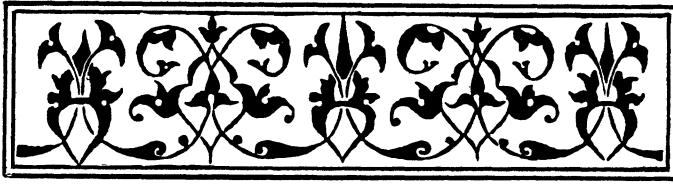
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THE FUNCTION OF THE MUSEUM INSTRUCTOR

THE present day finds all our public institutions in a state of anxious self-scrutiny and reorganization. When court, hospital, school, and even theatre and department store, are overhauling established traditions and testing them by the modern standard of efficient service to an often indifferent public, it is not surprising to find a similar quickening in the activities of our museums. As Mr. Benjamin Ives Gilman neatly puts it, the museum *gardant* and *monstrant* (the place of safe repository and orderly display) has become the museum *docent*, bent on placing its treasures as completely as possible within the reach of the public—or, more often, on stimulating the public to do a little reaching. Hence the modern development of explanatory labels and popular handbooks; hence, above all, the creation, in some form or other, of the office of museum instructor, with its varied duties of story-telling for children, addresses to schools and clubs, and the more intimate guidance of small groups of individuals.

But if the office is already established, the exact nature of its function is still under dispute. Put in the baldest form, the question is this:—Should the docent (to use a title that is at all events non-committal) aim to impart information about the object, or to develop appreciation of its qualities? The advocates of the first view plead that love of beauty is an emotion, and cannot be taught; that facts, on the other hand, are something that can be safely imparted, that they at least give the object the added interest that comes from a local habitation and a name, and often put it to use as an illustration of some outside study—say

history or geography. They hint that thus the museum collection becomes serviceable even to the multitude who “have no eye for beauty.” Per contra, the retort is made that the love of beauty is indeed an emotion, but one which is latent in all normal human beings, and which can, by judicious suggestion, be kindled; that facts regarding the origin and historical relations of a given work of art are, however, quite irrelevant to appreciation, and tend rather to stifle it; and that the docent, therefore, should confine his comments largely to matters of line, hue, and texture. The two sides would demand docents of very different temperament—one the thoughtful student, the other the sensitive artist (in perceptions, if not in actual accomplishment).

Now, some years’ actual experience and a good deal of observation of others who are or have been engaged in the same work have led me to believe that these apparently opposing aims are not mutually exclusive; that both are justified, and that, to be successful, each must borrow something from the other. The instructor must rouse emotion, the appreciator must provide a background of fact. In short, the distinction lies rather in method and emphasis than in the materials used, or in qualifications of temperament and training.

Both the common qualities and the distinctions can best be illustrated by a concrete case.¹ The docent, let us say, on his first hour of duty meets a class of high-school pupils sent to the museum for “background” in Greek history. They go together into the collection of Greek vases, and he pours forth to the class at large his facts. “These queer black and red ob-

¹I am here using extreme and unmingled types of the two classes of instruction.

jects, upwards of 2,500 years old, are not curios, they are just dishes. This one the girls used for bringing home the day's supply of water; you can see them doing so in the drawing on its side." Then follows the little description of the village fountain, perhaps illustrated by other vase-paintings, and the comparison with present-day conditions. Again, attention is drawn to a kylix, with the very banquet in which it was used portrayed on its side—a reminder of the dinners in Herodotus or Plato where the guests lay on just such couches, and slaves like these scampered about refilling the cups. And so vase after vase will make vivid the meagre and often half-grasped accounts learned for school recitations, till the youngsters begin to feel that these remote Greeks were after all lively flesh and blood like themselves. But even as an illustration of history the talk will not be complete until the docent has gone back, say, to the first vase, and has pointed out its essentially Hellenic traits, the same traits which appear in the temples and the poems and the carefully articulated systems of government which the class has studied, and which, on the other hand, are wanting in so much of our modern furniture and so-called fine art—till he has shown, that is, first, the perfect adaptation of each part—lip, foot, handle—to its special use, and of the decoration, in both subject and line, to the whole; and second, that genial delight in humanity which, wherever possible, uses for decorative motives men and women at their daily occupations. Thus the class as a whole carries back to its books some sort of *mise-en-scène* for the deeds of fifth-century Athenians, and at least a few elect members have caught a glimpse of something in the character of the doers that transforms the tale from disjointed annals to an inevitable development. And this flash of new light, absolutely relevant to the aim of the class-room instructor, came through a true, if incomplete, appreciation of the vase.

The following hour has perhaps been engaged by a woman who wants to see some of the less familiar collections. A little questioning reveals that she is not conscious of any special predilection; so the

docent suggests, "Suppose we take something related to our own daily life; how about dishes?" Back they go to the Greek vase collection, to the very hydria that formed a starting-point for the class; and with the adult visitor, as with the children, the surest way of fixing attention is a word or two of preliminary fact: age, use, something about the original owners. But the piece thus introduced becomes, this time, not a symbol of Greek life and spirit, but a thing with a character of its own. The visitor's experience in lifting a heavy filled pitcher by the side handle and trying to steady it so that the water shall not surge out at the lip will make her quick to detect the perfect fitness to use in number and placing of handles, and in the sharp confining in-curve of the shoulder. It will then be easy, by showing her earlier examples, to lead her to discover how the curve of the body, the meeting of neck and shoulder, the swelling out of the handles at their junction points, have all been studied and developed till they afford to the eye a sense of exquisite adjustment similar to that which the structure gives to the user's muscles. Before long the visitor discovers that the docent, instead of offering her difficult points of connoisseurship, or solemn rhapsodies on Beauty, has given her principles in accordance with which she, too, can observe and analyze and enjoy; and thereafter her own comments and questions will determine what else they shall look at together: whether they shall linger in the vase room to enjoy other types of the same art, or go off to look for a similar spirit expressing itself in some Greek marble or coin, or for similarities and differences in adjustment of design to use in English furniture or Gothic tapestry. The visitor's gain, when the hour ends, should be not only a new sensitiveness of observation that enables her to search for and delight in the significant distinctions of form and spirit, but also the discovery that such observation will be keener and more enjoyable the more deeply it is tinged with the sympathy that comes from historical and technical knowledge.

It is evident that the docent's equipment must be the same, whether he is to meet

class or single guest. He must know, first, the objects in the collections with an intimacy sufficient to perceive clearly their characteristic traits, practical and aesthetic; second, the history of their times, at least far enough to sympathize with the circumstances and problems of their creators; and third, the varied museum public, so that he can seize quickly on the appropriate object and facts to kindle the interest of each visitor or group. But equally clear is the difference in method and purpose with which the equipment is used. In the first case he is presenting a lesson, necessarily predetermined, to a class as a whole; he uses museum material, but could use it to better advantage in a place less distractingly novel to the students; he adapts to his audience, but to its average, not to individuals, nor (in any satisfactory degree) in response to self-revealing questions. In short, he does nothing which, *given equal equipment*, could not be done as well by the regular teacher in the regular class-room;¹ he is an instructor pure and simple.

In the second case, however, he drops the class-room manner, and becomes the host, alert to give his visitors pleasure by presenting to them his familiar friends among the collections. His task is a matter of self-effacing social tact, first in choosing congenial subjects for introduction, second in unobtrusively giving the guest such information as will place him *en rapport* with his new acquaintance, and lastly in so revealing the latter as to lay the foundations of a friendship that may be continued without further intervention from himself.

Both functions, then, belong legitimately to the museum instructor; but while in the one he is cheered by the consciousness that he is offering a serviceable and (under present conditions) otherwise unobtainable supplement to the curricula of the regular schools, into the other he throws himself with the enthusiastic conviction that he is helping fulfil the peculiar purpose of his chosen institution, the museum.

ELIZABETH M. WHITMORE.

¹ I am speaking only of the docent's specific instruction—not of its undoubted by-product, a quickened curiosity about, and perhaps love for, the museum itself.

A HOLIDAY EXPERIMENT²

IT was felt that during the month of August, something might be done to brighten the holidays of the many school children who were unable this year to go into the country; in fact, an opportunity appeared to present itself to those who believe in the moral and mental value of art teaching to try the experiment of interesting children intelligently in some of the treasures of our museums.³ The Victoria and Albert Museum, being larger than any other, and apparently depleted to a greater extent of its custodians, appeared the best field, and one particularly suitable for the Art Teachers' Guild. The objects in this museum do not appeal so obviously to the children as the animals and birds in the Natural History Museum, or the models of working machines in the Science Museum which, as one of the children called it, is "the place where you press a button and turn a handle, Miss," this last fulfilling the need of the child mind—wanting to do something, even if only pressing a button or turning a handle.

Sir Cecil Smith, the Director of the Museum, was accordingly approached, and the request proffered that members of the Art Teachers' Guild might take in hand those children who were found wandering aimlessly in the galleries. A personal interview was the immediate result, at which the Director explained that it had long been his desire to set on foot some such movement, whether on the lines of establishing a "Children's Room" containing exhibits of peculiar interest to children as in some of the American museums, or in some other manner. The necessary economies during the war time appeared to render the idea more difficult to attain, although the need was even greater. The Director eagerly accepted the proposal and at once made the necessary arrangements; a special room was

²Reprinted from The Art Teachers' Guild Record, London, September, 1915.

³An interesting letter from Miss Spiller chronicles the continuation and development of such holiday guidance during the summer of 1916, with the modest statement, "With added experience we feel that something of lasting good may have been commenced."